

TIP OF THE TONGUE: extract

‘You’re sure it’ll work?’ Jonny said.

Nettie sighed, sounding twenty years older than her own fourteen. ‘It worked for Uncle Paul,’ she said.

‘He’ll get mad that you sold it –’

‘He’s on a tropical island by Australia somewhere shooting at people in swamps.’

Nettie’s young uncle had rented a room from her mother before he’d shipped out. There was a harsh anxiety in Nettie’s voice that she wasn’t altogether successful in disguising. ‘He’s got other things to worry about.’

Jonny was still hesitant. Nettie gave an exasperated *tut*. ‘Try it!’ she practically shouted. ‘If it doesn’t work, you don’t have to buy it. We can forget the whole thing.’

‘OK,’ Jonny finally said, holding out his hand. Nettie placed the Truth Teller in his palm. It stared up at him balefully, its yellow eyes full of weary sadness. ‘It looks depressed.’

‘If it was a machine, I’d fix it,’ Nettie said, impatiently. Which was true. She could fix nearly anything. Jonny’s bike several times, a door at his house that had never hung properly. Her Uncle Paul had been great with his hands and a worshipful Nettie had mooned around him for years like the world’s most devoted younger sister, almost accidentally learning how to repair toasters and change the oil in a Studebaker. ‘All I can tell you is that Paul said it worked.’

Jonny gently poked the small frown in his hand. It said nothing, but gave him a look of unsurprised hurt feelings.

He blew out a long breath. The Truth Teller was real. It was the closest he was ever going to get to being able to buy one. It could be his for two dollars.

And it might finally, *finally*, get Marisa Channing to notice him.

He turned it over, opened the two prongs at the back and unfurled the long body. He'd never worn one and wasn't exactly sure how it was supposed to fit, but there were only so many ways it could go. He opened his mouth, put the two prongs on either side of his tongue, and rolled the body down over his chin and under his neck, draping it there like his face was wearing a tie.

'How's it look?' he asked, his tongue tripping a little over the prongs.

Nettie crossed her arms. 'Don't ask me. I hate those things. I don't approve of this transaction at all, remember?'

'I remember,' he said. 'How do you get it to say anything?'

'It should –' she said, reaching forward.

'*I like you only as a friend,*' the Truth Teller said, its eyes looking directly from Jonny's chin into Nettie's face.

She frowned. 'It works.'

After the two dollars was handed over and a bewildered but nervously happy Jonny went one way back to his job at the diner and a richer but somehow still irritated Nettie went the other way back to *her* job at Mr Bacon's gas station, a blond man dressed in what seemed to be a cricketing uniform with what seemed to be a stalk of celery on his lapel, stepped out of what seemed to be absolutely nowhere with a thoughtful look on his face.

But surely none of that could be possible.

'Surely none of this can be possible,' he said, almost cheerfully.

'None of what?' said a woman with long, curly hair, stepping out of the nothingness behind him. 'They seemed like nice enough children.'

‘Yes, Nyssa,’ the man said. ‘But this is Earth, 1945.’ He took in a deep breath. There was sea salt in the air. ‘Maine, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘And?’

‘And the Diphodot aren’t supposed to arrive here for at least a hundred years. They should still be halfway across the galaxy at this point in the timeline.’

‘So what are they doing here now, Doctor?’

‘What, indeed, Nyssa?’ the Doctor said, putting his hands in his pockets. ‘That sounds like a question that needs answering.’